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Soviets Grant Asylum To Fugitive CIA Agent

Howard Sold Key U.S. Secrets to Moscow

5 By Walter Pincus
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The Soviet news agency Tass announced yesterday that Edward Lee Howard, the fugitive former Central Intelligence Agency operative who sold critical secrets to the Soviet Union, had been granted asylum in the Soviet Union.

Tass reported that Howard had asked to live in the Soviet Union because "he has to hide from U.S. secret services which unfoundedly persecute him," Washington Post correspondent Celestine Bohlen reported from Moscow. Howard's request was granted by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, which acted on "humane considerations," Tass said. "He has been granted the right to live in the U.S.S.R. for political reasons."

Howard's defection was also announced on the back page of the government newspaper Izvestia, which described him as a U.S. citizen and "a former CIA officer." Neither Tass nor Izvestia revealed how long Howard has been in the Soviet Union or where he now is.

U.S. sources said yesterday that Howard's request may have been related to a recent decision by his wife, Mary, to cooperate fully with American investigators and a telephone call he made to her earlier this week.

On Tuesday, Howard telephoned his wife from Moscow and attempted to persuade her and their 4-year-old son to join him there, according to informed sources.

She refused, the sources said.

Howard's father, Ken Howard, told the Garland Daily News of Garland, Tex., that he also received a call Tuesday from Moscow in which his son "said more or less he's going to settle down [in the Soviet Union] and wants his family to come see him," according to the Associated Press.

"I'm relieved to know where he's at and that he's okay," the

elder Howard was quoted as saying.

The CIA had no comment. One official said Howard is "the first [agency] employee to take asylum [in the Soviet Union] in 39 years, while scores of Soviet intelligence officers have defected to us."

Howard, 34, who had been trained to handle Soviet citizens who were U.S. agents in Moscow, gave away secrets about U.S. operations in the Soviet capital that have virtually shut down operations there, according to intelligence sources.

At least five American officials have been caught at espionage in the Soviet Union since Howard began selling secrets to the Soviet KGB secret police, according to U.S. government sources. In addition, an undisclosed number of Soviet citizens acting as U.S. agents in Moscow have disappeared, and at least one is believed to have been executed, sources have said.

Because Howard was cut off from his son, whom he loved, and with the worldwide manhunt run by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and CIA closing in on him, his decision to seek political asylum in the Soviet Union came as no shock yesterday to U.S. officials who were aware of the contents of his phone call, sources said.

A former neighbor and close friend of Howard said yesterday she believed his reaction to being told he would not be reunited with his son, Lee, was "to go someplace where he could be taken care of."

"He was always so full of himself before," Kate Gallegos, the neighbor, said. "He had to be desperate to ask for help, for asylum."

One intelligence expert said these latest events indicate Howard may have had a longer and closer relationship with Soviet intelligence than had been suspected.

"We are going to have to go back and look at it again," he said. "Howard's escape plan, his contingency

plans and organization may mean that Howard was far more than a KGB recruit picked up on a random basis."

Howard joined the agency in 1981 and went into training, along with his wife, to be an agent in Moscow. In early 1983, on the eve of his departure to the Soviet Union, he failed a lie detector test, and a subsequent investigation showed a pattern of past drug use, alcoholism and petty thievery.

He was fired and subsequently took a job with the state legislature in Santa Fe, N.M. After pleading guilty to an assault charge, he began traveling overseas and making contact with the Soviets. In mid-1985, Soviet defector Vitaly Yurchenko identified an ex-CIA agent as working for the KGB. When FBI agents were ready to question Howard, he eluded their surveillance and escaped with help from his wife.

He remained at large and his wife, after initially admitting her role in his escape, refused to give any more help.

Earlier this year, FBI agents in Santa Fe complained that Mary Howard was still not cooperating because she would not close down their joint credit cards, according to friends of the couple in Santa Fe.

One month ago, the FBI and the CIA, which had been embarrassed by Howard's escape, believed they were beginning to close in on him after finally getting cooperation from his wife.

At that time, Howard was reportedly in Vienna after he unsuccessfully attempted to use a credit card to transfer money, sources said.

Howard had been traced to Helsinki, Finland, where he used his credit cards soon after fleeing the United States. It was speculated at that time that he had gone to the Soviet Union, and there was one report circulating on Capitol Hill that he had committed suicide.

On Capitol Hill yesterday, the handful of legislators familiar with the situation said Howard's defection reemphasized the need to correct the weaknesses he exposed in CIA and FBI operations.

Asked about secrets passed on by Howard, Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.), vice chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, said: "You just have to assume it's serious damage, but I don't think the extent of the damage will ever be made public. Nor should it be."